

Hearing – but not listening

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In all groups, there are hierarchies. Some men and women sit at the top of the table. Others do all the practical work; they bring food when asked, or even without being asked. They clean up afterwards, and they keep books and papers in order. When certain men – or women – speak, the others become quiet; they just listen, nod and look thoughtful. Sometimes, they ask questions, but not difficult questions, because they want the speaker to feel good and in control.

In other situations, we don't bow our heads in admiration, neither literally or figuratively. We may directly or indirectly express our disagreement or shake our heads, indicating that we know better ourselves or are outraged by what is being said.

Sometimes, we look like we are listening. We may nod our heads politely from time to time. In actual fact, though, we may not listen at all. We may hear, but not listen.

This is what I want to discuss in today's article, because this has become so common nowadays. We hear what someone says, but we don't try to listen to understand on the speaker's terms. We may not even be interested in what he or she has to say. We simply switch on our 'objection mode', ignoring whatever new points the speaker offers, and we quickly decide that we know more and better ourselves. But we should also know that listening doesn't necessarily mean agreeing.

We can talk about 'closed minds', intellectual arrogance, being lazy towards new concepts, thoughts and theories, and many other things. Yet, we don't change our behavior, usually because we don't know how wrong and unfortunate our own behavior is for ourselves.

Our educational institutions, with their specialists in pedagogy and learning psychology, usually focus more on the teaching aspects, or the 'speaking aspects' rather than the learning aspects, the 'listening aspects'. Some of it is general to people anywhere on our globe, while other parts of it may belong to certain, more static cultures and traditions, with less dynamic and open characteristics. I believe we have quite a bit of the latter in Pakistan, but luckily less among the young than the middle-aged and old.

Last week, I had the opportunity to attend a few meetings where Bashy Quraishy was the speaker. He is a prominent Pakistani-Danish of the best caliber there is. He was born in Sialkot seventy years ago but left at twenty and has since lived in Denmark and travelled to many other European countries and beyond. His mission and trademark is to speak about and create understanding for Islam and Muslims in Europe, and for the value of people from irrespective of creed or colour. He works for everyone to realize the importance of respecting others – and themselves. But he also wants people to question their values and hold belief that is relevant in our time. Instead of only criticizing that Pakistan is unfairly treated by the foreign media, why don't we also ask if there is something to it? When asked about his own identity, Quraishy simply said that he hope that people would say that he is a decent human being.

Quraishy is the chairman of the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) and he is currently visiting Pakistan for a few weeks, busy giving lectures and attending meetings, talking about how well many Pakistanis have done in Denmark, appreciating, too, that it isn't always easy for foreigners to integrate in a faraway land. He was optimistic for closer inclusion of immigrants, Muslims, and others in the coming decades.

Quraishy was the keynote speaker at a large evening meeting on Saturday. However, the organizers must have been worried about what the liberal and untraditional Pakistani-Danish would say, wearing an artist's cap and a colourful scarf. They must have thought he could overwhelm them with his critique and modern views. Hence, they had invited a number of opponents, who didn't address the topic, which was to discuss how good Muslims Pakistanis are. Instead, they gave general speeches about the religion, with standard interpretations of Islam. Quraishy had pointed out several areas where we all, Muslim or not, need to do better, but the speakers were rather righteous and seemingly confident in their own skin.

Therefore, the meeting turned out to be a typical example of a gathering where nobody listened to the others' views. The views of the keynote speaker weren't even examined. None went into dialogue or debate. Sometimes, they acknowledged politely that the keynote speaker had good intentions and had good human qualities. But shouldn't all have listened to the keynote speaker – and all the other speakers – and tried to understand the messages? That was what I did. I listened to them all, also those who spoke far outside the topic. I got many indirect messages and learned new things. Yet, the main lesson I drew was simply that nobody wanted to change their thinking and behaviour; they felt quite comfortable the way they were.

Reflecting further after the meeting, I began to realize that the meeting was not all that different from so many other meetings I attend, just a bit more crude and controlled. And since the topic was religion and ethics that closed many listeners' minds almost at the outset; nobody wanted to question own habits, practices and belief.

I came to think of a term used by a radical Norwegian theologian, Dr. Helge Hognestad, coined a generation ago: 'the Church created reality' (and we could exchange church for mosque). Hognestad said that we use terms and concepts without much thought to what they mean. They may make sense to those inside the group, but would hardly make sense to those who were on the outside. Insiders, too, would often use the terms, read the parables and dogma, exchange views, and so on, using language out of convention and tradition. Religion would mainly be a ritual.

Often, when we attend meetings and seminars, also religious gatherings, we hear what the speakers say, but we don't listen, well, unless the speakers say something we agree with and have thought about ourselves. And we may listen attentively if speakers says something we are curious about, something that it is 'in' and 'en vogue', or for other reasons that would catch our interest. Indeed, we would listen attentively if the speakers were saying something that was also the opinion of our peer group, our relatives, friends, colleagues and others who think the same way as we do. And maybe we would listen carefully if somebody gave a recipe for how to become rich fast?

In the end, I recalled that Jesus, too, told his disciples that often people were just hearing God's word, not listening to it. So, it is an age-old phenomenon. Yet, should we not have confidence and courage to listen to others, think for ourselves and then do what is right?

We should listen to keynote speakers, senior mullahs, men and women sitting at the top of the table, but we should also listen to all the others, and then draw our own conclusions. Then we would learn and been honest to ourselves and the speakers. At the next meeting I will attend, I will remind myself – and maybe the others in the meeting, too, especially if there are differences: let us not only hear what the others say; let us listen to each other with an open mind.

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